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AUTHOR Smith, David C.
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ABSTRACT

There are a wide variety of areas in the field of education in which policy studies are needed for the guidance and enlightenment of state policy makers. While there is not an absence of data in these areas, data are limited in scope, are of questionable validity, or are insufficiently powerful to effectively guide the formation of public policy. These areas are: (1) teacher supply and demand; (2) teacher testing and performance; (3) student testing and performance; (4) high school graduation requirements and curriculum; (5) certification requirements; (6) certification extension requirements; and (7) merit pay and career ladder programs. Those who work with policy makers cannot afford to be ignorant of the information that is available, and they have a responsibility to use it effectively. (JD)

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POLICY RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

David C. Smith, Dean
College of Education
University of Florida

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Perspective

These views are not presented from the perspective of a policy analyst; rather they are presented from the view of one who is influenced and, in some sense, directed by policy makers at state and national levels. They are also presented from the perspective of one who is influenced by the lack of attention to policy analysis by policy makers.

The views expressed in this paper are necessarily influenced by the fact the writer is the past-President of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE); past-President of the Florida Association Colleges for Teacher Education (FACTE); and currently serving as a member and Chair of the Education Standards Commission in the State of Florida.

The Temper Of Our Time

Our time can be characterized as one in which there is intense interest and concern over the quality of American public education. Literally, scores of state and federal commissions and blue ribbon committees have held meetings, heard testimony, issued reports concerning various aspects of education, and offered recommendations for its improvement. Too

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many of the reports can be characterized as a search for the "quick-fix fountain of easy and cheap solutions to complex problems."

Realists recognize that the call for improvement without the commitment of resources to accomplish the change constitutes an empty promise. Nevertheless, the implied policies suggested in the recommendations of these various groups assume inordinate importance because of the volume of education legislation emanating from the prolific pens found in state legislatures.

Difficulties of Policy Studies

Not uncommonly, policy actions are tracked through tabulations of policy actions. Studies of state activity regarding teacher testing might serve as an example of studies of this type. The data reported in such studies frequently include the date of adoption of the current state policy; whether the tests applied are locally developed or nationally available; and measure subject matter, basic skills, and/or professional knowledge, and the like. An attempt is frequently made to include special aspects of the particular policy being studied. For example, the State of Florida has adopted the requirement that at least 80% of the graduates of a program must pass the Beginning Teacher Examination or state approval of the program is withdrawn.

However, the special problems associated with studies of this type almost inevitably persist. It is extremely difficult to measure and describe the subtleties and nuances of the special conditions as they

exist in virtually every state. Again, the Florida example applies. While it is true this requirement has been placed upon schools, colleges, and departments of education (SCDEs) in Florida, it is also true there is a mechanism available to SCDEs which can substantially diminish the impact of the requirement. The point is, it is extremely difficult to measure and describe the complexity inherent in legislation and newly adopted policy.

Care also needs to be taken to suggest that policy research is not necessarily an essential ingredient in policy making. It is all too easy to observe through experience that policy makers will make decisions in the absence of data rather than defer or delay action on matters perceived to be important and in the public interest. Decisions are often made or legislation enacted on the best information available - or on no information, as the case may be - rather than wait for data to be collected and analyzed in order to create more effective policy.

It is also not to say policy makers will necessarily be influenced by data, should data on a given policy question be available. For example, there are data ("Tomorrow's Teachers") which suggest that individuals entering teaching today represent essentially the same cross-section of the college population they have during the past decade; that is, there is not a deep erosion in quality in the academic ability of individuals entering teaching today as contrasted with their cohorts in past years. Nevertheless, the perception and the belief that individuals entering education represent

the least able of the academic community persist. As a result, it is obvious that having data does not mean the data will influence the development of data-based educational policy.

Probably the most realistic scenario (and the best case) is the use of partial - that is, available - data to inform and influence policy makers.

An example of data applied to influence policy development in education might be useful.

During the past year, David Berliner developed an extraordinarily useful and effective statement relative to public policy applied to teacher education. He established a clear and convincing case of the efficacy of the professional component in teacher preparation. Furthermore, he described the nature of the content essential for incorporation into teacher preparation programs.

On the other hand, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) recently released a report in which partial data were interpreted in such a manner as to call into question the effectiveness of professional components in preservice teacher preparation programs.

The SREB data were exploited by the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission in Florida and used to support a recommendation for the adoption of an alternative teacher preparation program which would make it possible for individuals to teach at the secondary school level

with a baccalaureate degree in an appropriate teaching field, completion of a modified beginning teacher program, and no formal preparation in professional education. That recommendation was subsequently enacted; however, it remains an open question as to whether the legislative mind-set could have been altered, even to the presentation of a powerful set of data.

Areas In Which Policy Studies Are Needed

There are a wide variety of areas in which policy studies are sorely needed in education. There is no attempt, at this point, to be exhaustive; rather, areas in which policy studies could be clearly useful are presented. It should be noted there is not necessarily an absence of data in all of the areas cited; rather, it is to suggest there are areas in which the data are limited in scope, of questionable validity, or are insufficiently powerful to effectively guide the formation of public policy.

Supply and demand

Teacher testing and performance

Student testing and performance

High school graduation requirements and curriculum

Certification requirements

Certification extension requirements

Merit pay/career ladder programs

A Final Thought

In the final analysis, those who work with policy makers cannot afford

to be ignorant of the information that is available and they have a responsibility to use it effectively. It is inexcusable for those who work with policy makers to be ignorant of the data that are available in areas in which public policy is being considered.